

Quo Vadis África?

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One would never have guessed that the the presentation of the Synod's Working Document was **the main reason** for Pope Benedict's recent visit to Africa. The media barely mentioned the event, focusing all their attention instead on the Pope's remark about condoms not being the answer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Yet the Synod is surely an important event not only for the the Church in Africa but for all who are working in its service.

The publishing of the Working Document signals the home stretch for reflection and immediate preparation for the Synod. The document itself is a synthesis of the responses received from the many bishops' conferences throughout Africa and from representatives of missionary congregations to the guidelines and questionnaire (*lineamenta*) that were sent in preparation for the Synod three years ago. In this short article, I wish to highlight and comment on some key points of the document and also to draw attention to a number of surprising lacunae.

Whereas the first Synod was concerned with the evangelising mission of the Church in general, the theme chosen for this second Synod, "the Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace", targets explicitly the *ad extra* dimension of the Church's mission, its prophetic role in society. Presenting the Working Document, Pope Benedict underlined this focus: "Amidst the unfortunately numerous and dramatic conflicts still afflicting various parts of the continent, the Church is aware she must be a sign and instrument of reconciliation, so that all Africa may come together to build a future of justice, solidarity, and peace, implementing the teachings of the Gospel."

The document itself is a rather hefty 64 pages, comprising four chapters with an introduction and conclusion. Chapter one begins with a brief overview of the changes in the socio-political context of Africa and in the Church since 1994 and balances positive and negative developments. On the positive side, the document notes that, in spite of continuing *coup d'états* and setbacks, some progress has been made towards establishing more democratic forms for government. Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Liberia are just some examples. The creation of the African Union (replacing the former rather inept OAU) and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) are "signs of a willingness on the part of those in politics to provide a vision and strategic plan to assist Africa emerge from poverty and marginalization" (no. 8). The document also views the creation of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in S. Africa and elsewhere as significant home grown efforts to resolve conflicts.

On the ecclesial front, the document not surprisingly highlights the rapid growth and vitality of the Church in Africa: "The Church has witnessed the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit... seen in an increase in baptisms, in priestly and religious vocations, in

movements and associations of the faithful” (no. 10). Over the past century the number of Catholics has grown from 2 million to 154 million or 17% of the total population. Since the first African Synod, the number of priests and religious has more than doubled, and the number of bishops has increased by 18%.

Positive ecclesial developments also mentioned in the document are the “Small Christian communities (SCC)” which “are actively involved in social life” (no. 9) and the establishment of Justice and Peace Commissions in many dioceses which “have been truly instruments of evangelization in awakening the Christian conscience to the defense of human rights, good governance, etc.” (no. 19). I noted three rather surprising lacunae: the enormous contribution of women in several vital apostolates, the dramatic growth in the number of missionaries from Africa, male and female, engaged in the *ad gentes* mission of the Church, and the commitment of organisations such as A/EFJN and AFJN to the struggle for economic justice for Africans.

On the negative side, the document, without drowning us in pessimism, gives us a clear-eyed analysis of Africa’s woes: “Selfishness nurtures greed, corruption and the allurements of gain. It is the driving force in the misappropriation of goods and riches destined for entire populations. The thirst for power leads to contempt for all the elementary rules of good governance, takes advantage of people’s lack of knowledge, manipulates political, ethnic, tribal and religious differences and creates cultures where warriors are considered heroes and people need to be paid back for past sacrifices and wrongs committed” (no. 11). In this statement, the working document identifies the root causes of most of Africa’s current problems. These problems have been succinctly described by James O’Connell: “Black Africa is faced with a problematic future. It has the lowest incomes of any part of the world; it has had proportionately more foreign aid than Asian countries but to less effect; it is beset by disease and famine; it is riven by many divisions and conflicts; it has had too many despotic governments unwilling to hand over power when they have lost legitimacy; it harbours financial corruption and is bedevilled by inefficient bureaucracies” (“A Continent in Transition: Balancing Hopes and Fears in sub-Saharan Africa” in the *SMA Generalate Bulletin*, December 2006, pp. 7-8).

It is worthy of note that the Working Document states clearly that Africans share responsibility for this dismal situation. They are both victims and authors of their own predicament (no. 13). However, the document states that “outside forces” are contributing to Africa’s woes. It mentions explicitly the arms industry “from which the countries of the industrially developed world profit immensely” (no. 65) and the phenomenon of globalisation, “which is tending to marginalize Africa” (no. 13). Africa is also being adversely affected by the recent global financial crisis - a crisis which has revealed the moral bankruptcy of what Pope John Paul II has termed “savage capitalism”. Another contributing factor mentioned is the phenomenon of climate change, “whose effects are being felt in arid areas” of the continent and which “is compromising the modest gains of African economies” (no. 58).

Chapter two of the Working Document looks at the main “obstacles” and “openings” which the Church and African society in general encounters on the road to reconciliation, justice, and peace. There are obstacles arising from the political, economic and cultural spheres of African social life as well as from within the Church itself. Politically, many African societies have been ruined by their political leaders

who have fuelled ethnic, tribal and regional conflicts in their own lust for power. Economically, bad management combined with greed and ludicrous levels of corruption have undermined the economies of many countries - some of them well endowed with natural resources - leading to poverty, disease, spiralling unemployment, prostitution, trafficking in human beings and massive migration. Culturally, the media (radio, press, television) have contributed to a growing loss of cultural identity, especially among the young, and a disregard for traditional African values, giving rise to juvenile delinquency, abandonment to drugs and sexual promiscuity.

Within the Church, there is often a credibility gap between what is proclaimed and what is lived. The ethnic, tribal and regional divisions that mar African societies in general are visible in ecclesial communities. Some bishops adopt positions favouring a specific political party. In Church structures, women are often given an inferior role and treated unjustly. Among priests and bishops there is sometimes a lack of transparency in the management of Church goods and finances (no. 61). There is a decline in Christian practice in some Particular Churches. A great number of Christians wrongly identify the Church with the hierarchy. Some priests and men and women religious give scandal by engaging "in occult practices – which can even occur at times of praying for healing and deliverance – and vying for social positions, instead of devoting themselves to serving the least of the brethren" (n. 95).

Though not mentioned in the Working Document, one should add to the above list of obstacles, the counterwitness given by many priests and even some bishops in the area of celibacy and the widespread sexual exploitation of religious women by the clergy – involving, in some cases, the procuring of abortions when these sisters become pregnant.

Under the heading "openings", the document is rather reticent, mentioning just three examples: the employment of traditional models of reconciliation and the Christian practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (n. 48); the African Mechanism of Evaluation of Peers (AMEP) which "seeks to identify the forms and causes of the corruption which rages on the continent" (n. 57); and the successful participation of the Church "in national peace efforts in some countries as a result of the teaching and activity of her Pastors" (n. 67).

The third chapter focuses on the mission of the Church as the Family of God in the service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace and suggests some ways in which the Church can respond to the challenges mentioned in chapter two. The tone of this chapter is moralistic and theoretical and it contains little that is new or practical. The chapter underlines, as did the first African Synod, the critical importance of ensuring that the Word of God penetrates the many cultures of Africa and finds expression in "their languages, their concepts, their symbols and their religious traditions" (n. 73). It advocates a greater use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, especially "a form of communal celebration, according to the norms of the Church" which would "contribute to redressing the wounds of a society torn apart by violence, conflicts and wars" (n. 86). It states that the Church "enjoys great credibility in many African societies" and urges her "to become more courageously involved in building bridges between people" (n. 90).

Chapter three draws attention to the potential of the Small Christian Communities and their lay animators “to become involved in efforts for reconciliation and a more just and peaceful society” (n. 93). The Church, it says, also promotes reconciliation, justice and peace through her dialogue with other Churches and ecclesial communities, as well as with traditional African religions and Islam. These complement her more traditional ministries in the areas of Health, Education and Socio-Economic Development which remain as important as ever and must be strengthened. I must say I was disappointed by the absence of any creative ideas or concrete proposals which might truly address the specific difficulties and challenges clearly identified in the previous chapters. Pious platitudes and moralistic exhortations will do little to answer the searing problems which confront Africans as they struggle together to build a future of justice, solidarity and peace.

The final chapter of the document reflects on the roles and responsibilities of the various Church members (bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay people) and ecclesial structures and institutions in promoting reconciliation, justice and peace. Most of the chapter simply states what is already being done in this area by the various Church members and structures mentioned. Once again the tone of this chapter is moralistic rather than practical. However, there is a good deal of emphasis on the vitally important role of women, both religious and lay, in the promotion of justice, peace and reconciliation. The feminine “genius”, when “used according to the Spirit of Christ, helps generate a culture of peace and not violence, life and not death, humaneness and not brutality. The role of women will be more effective, if the Church-Family enlists them in her mission in a more visible, straightforward manner” (no. 117).

This chapter highlights as well the importance of formation programmes which incorporate the Social Teaching of the Church and proposes that “pastoral workers” should take part in these programmes “so that they can participate more effectively in building a culture of reconciliation, justice and peace” (no. 128). At the level of Episcopal Conferences, the meetings of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) with the episcopal conferences of Asia and Europe are mentioned as witnessing “to the solidarity of the universal Church” and “something which should be encouraged” (no. 121).

There are two glaring lacunae in this final chapter. There is no explicit acknowledgement of the hugely important role that the members of missionary societies and congregations continue to play in promoting reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. Their contribution is far more significant than many of the Justice and Peace Commissions which are frequently mentioned and praised. Nor is there any mention of the vitally important contribution of international organisations such as AEFJN (which represents 44 missionary and religious congregations working in Africa and Europe) in promoting equitable economic relations between Africa and Europe.

As I came to the conclusion of the Working Document I felt something more general was missing from it. It did not seem to do justice to another side of Africa that I have come to know and love. What was missing was the Africa of “ordinary miracles” referred to in a recent heart-warming book by Richard Dowden, *Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, published last year by Portobello Press. This is the Africa seldom mentioned in the media, the Africa of immense beauty, of open spaces and luminous

skies, the Africa of ordinary people who humble us by their stoicism, selflessness and exuberant delight in company. This is not the Africa of helpless victims, worthy only of pity, as portrayed by the Media and the by Western Aid agencies, the Africa Tony Blair described as “a scar on the conscience of the world”. It is rather the Africa depicted in Stephen Carr’s beautiful little book, *Surprised by Laughter*, the Africa of smiling children, of song and dance, of laughter and celebration, of creativity and resilience. It is an Africa that can teach us a lot about what it means to be human and remind us of values that are fast disappearing from the developed countries of the world.

It is certainly true that Africa faces enormous problems, problems of its own making as well as problems caused, or at least aggravated, by outside forces. It is also true that Africans cannot solve all these problems alone, but it is equally true, as Richard Dowden points out, that Africa must “take the initiative in solving its own problems. With the continent caught at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, the key to Africa’s development lies in her children and her ability to be at home in all that is Western and all that is modern, graced by the spirit of ubuntu” (*Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, p. 215).

For all its limitations, the Working Document does succeed in highlighting the major issues that need to be honestly looked at by the Synod and later put into action: the challenge of good governance, the contagion of corruption, globalization and the challenge of fair and functioning economic development, land and farming issues, health care challenges, educational opportunities; integrity and transparency within the Church, the empowerment of women and young people, unemployment and the brain drain, the transformation of cultures, tribalism and ethnic conflicts, the impact of global warming, and many more. One can only hope that, by the action of the Holy Spirit, the Synod will prove to be fruitful in mobilising the considerable energies and talents of the African Church in the service of reconciliation, peace and justice for all the peoples of that great continent. And let us hope, too, that it will not continue to ignore the many missionary societies and congregations working in Africa.